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# **State of Global Power – Definitions, distributions and functions in our globalised world**

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## **Abstract**

This essay considers the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the World Social Forum (WSF) as example enactments and representations of a global field of power. It draws on 42 interviews with participants in these forums who hold capitals that are valued beyond national, social, economic and cultural boundaries. The implications of this work are that it is possible for multi-stakeholder dialogue to be enacted at a global level in order to pursue new worlds. Strength is in the heterogeneity of voices in the global field of power, with turning points in politics and economics opening up spaces for new, subversive yet legitimate actors to be heard. Despite contradictions and dilemmas, those who are engaged in the struggle to subvert existing dominance are slowly and surely having some effect. The new worlds may emerge through the influence of discordant experiences between individuals who see the world from different perspectives.

## **Introduction**

The literature on globalisation is vast and multidisciplinary, from how to do more and better to critically highlighting the inequalities perpetuated by globalising political and economic thought and actions. One area of literature examines global power enacted through the people who operate at a global level by virtue of the work they do. Existing research frequently reveals the dominance of the economic in multiple global processes, including the political, directing the systems and conventions that regulate 'how things are' in the world. For example, there are representatives of trade, politics and civil society who are positioned to act and influence across societies and these people have been theorised as collectively symbolising a "global ruling class" (Robinson & Harris, 2000), a "field of transnational relations" (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2007), or a "transnational capitalist class" (Sklair, 2012). A problem with this is the potential for a great deal of power to be concentrated with a relatively small number of unified individuals. One of the ways in which these individuals are enabled and empowered to create partnerships, alliances and consensus-driven activity is through the existence of global meetings and forums. Participants act as change agents through these and I have spent the last two years, through my doctoral research, exploring how, why and to what effect they act in two global forums: the World Social Forum (WSF) and the World Economic Forum (WEF).

What comes next in this essay is therefore a further contribution to the debates on global power. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of power (Bourdieu, 1996) I suggest the presence of such a field at a global level, with WSF and WEF as example enactments and representations of a global field of power. The struggle between economic and cultural capital particularly characterises Bourdieu's notion of the field of power. This idea enables us to appreciate the opportunities for individuals to struggle and challenge to provoke global level socio-economic change. I argue that there are individuals who marshal forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) other than economic, for example, knowledge and social capital, in order to enable them to offer legitimate but subversive positions. By expanding the notion of change agents beyond those who are imbued with this status through their corporate and/or

political positions, and moving beyond the unifying concept of class, it is possible to see the importance of the power relations between individuals for global social, political and/or economic effects.

As examples of participants in the global field of power, my 42 interviewees included: senior managers/founders of both international corporate and non-profit organizations; academic professors; grassroots activists; leaders of civil society organizations; and political representatives. Using anonymised quotes<sup>1</sup> I attempt to open up an understanding of how participants make sense of their participation, particularly in relation to the notion of dominant or incumbent positions and challenging or subversive positions in the global field of power. I hope to conclude, optimistically, by demonstrating some of the positive indicators for long term, structural effects on the current socio-economic order.

### **Global forums: the examples of the World Social Forum and the World Economic Forum**

In this section I offer a very brief introduction to the two global forums studied. From its first assembly in 2001, WSF has defined itself as “an open meeting place where social movements, networks, NGOs and other civil society organizations opposed to neoliberalism and a world dominated by capital or by any form of imperialism come together” (World Social Forum, 2002). It draws together in solidarity with one another those individuals who share a common commitment to transform the current global system, affecting numerous lives. In the words of Theo, a senior academic, *“the WSF helps us build a common, global language of resistance and alternatives to the current world order”*. He continues, *“The WSF is transforming global culture by introducing, via consultation, a common global set of concerns, a global interpretation of the problems, and many local and global solutions”*. The events and activities of WSF are driven by participants who challenge, subvert and act ‘differently’, generating transformation by playing a different game to that played by politicians and corporations. Those perceived to perpetuate the dominant and incumbent global regime in the name of their own economic interests. More voices can be heard through WSF than in other global forums, particularly the voices of those people who have few other vehicles of expression, and hundreds of thousands of people have participated in activities since its inception seeking to advocate the emergence of alternative worlds. Helen, an academic, describes, *“there’s always the opening march on the first day of [WSF], you just kind of think, ‘wow, I’m part of this amazing thing, this is what the world looks like”*”.

In contrast, WEF describes itself as “an independent international organization committed to improving the state of the world by engaging business, political, academic and other leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas”(World Economic Forum, 2012). It also aims for transformation in the current global system, but with an increasing focus on public-private cooperation (World Economic Forum, 2014). As Jacob, a senior academic, describes, *“[WEF] have such a huge network throughout the world... able with a flick of a finger to mobilise”*. WEF is formally organized and produces a significant amount of reports that receive media, political and business attention alike. The annual meeting held in Davos, Switzerland, is the flagship event but over time, WEF has promoted a programme of activity that has shown the way for participants to take greater responsibility towards solving global problems. Dylan, a civil servant, explained that WEF is a useful venue for dialogue around sustainability, bringing together several sets of people and particularly enabling policy makers to understand what business leaders do; *“this approach*

*is not unique to WEF but it brings people together in a unique way, [I] cannot think of another place where so many come together on a regular basis, none at such a high level of seniority”.*

Those who are able to attend these global forums are able to shape agendas and therefore have a form of global power. However, participation in both these forums is regulated, albeit to different degrees and in different ways, creating power relations of inclusion and exclusion. Three forms of exclusion in such global forums have been theorized (Ylä-Anttila, 2005): 1) formal, for example, the rules of participation, who is in and who is out; 2) structural, for example, the resources and networks to be able to participate; and 3) cultural, the portrayal as being unqualified to participate in some way. Participation may be structured according to, for example, resonant ‘day job’ roles and responsibilities, invitation, paid membership, and/or registration. Frances, a managing director, describes WEF as “a *membership organization*”; participants in WEF activities are individuals who have the economic resources to join the membership and/or are invited to participate because of their stake in business, politics, CSOs and celebrity. Even though WSF has a relatively open participation policy, it may still generate exclusions on the grounds of political affiliation (for example, holding political office), choice of political action (for example, violent direct action), resources (for example, inability to pay for travel to a meeting/event), and/or organizational focus (for example, religious representation or business focus). Nathan, an executive director, identifies the complex relationship of WSF with political actors, saying: *“there have been times where Lula has addressed the Social Forum, when he was president of Brazil, or Chavez when he was president of Venezuela, or Evo Morales as president of Bolivia...but they’re not part of the Social Forum in any kind of official way”.*

Initially, WSF emerged as a forum represented by events in antithesis to the activities of WEF, with symbolic contrasts of relatively open participation and geographic location in the global south. However, positioning the two forums as binary opponents minimises the complexity of positions represented therein, the paradoxes, dilemmas and struggles enacted therein as part of a wider global field of power. Global forums such as WSF and WEF offer informal places for individuals to meet and so for the global field of power to be visible. Participants in the forums are change agents because they have to hold the necessary capital in order to be able to participate and they represent a range of stakes (for example, business, political, those of civil society, religious) configured alongside one another and in different ways depending on the forum. These forums have symbolic importance and can be considered “laborator[ies] of global public debate” (Ylä-Anttila, 2005, p. 424), which have potential benefits and drawbacks for impacting global issues. They can both be seen as intersections that facilitate reproduction and/or subversion of a social trajectory. What differentiates these forums from other global meetings such as the United Nations or G8 is that participants are not elected or expected to attend by virtue of their role, rather they choose to attend voluntarily or through paid membership. Whilst neither of these forums represents the entirety of the global field of power, they illustrate examples of the enactment of this field through their activities for engagement with other individuals with significant capital towards influence and world making. This is explored further in the following section.

## **Defining the global field of power**

Bourdieu’s concept of the field of power is interpreted as a social space through which the elites of other social fields are bound together. These elites are imbued with symbols of

legitimacy that designate them as having decisional rights in some way, for example, seniority in their organization and/or industry and/or area of expertise. Whilst each field (for example, law, academia, politics) has its own field of power, and each society has its own field of power, it is proposed that there is also a global field of power. This is used to refer to the existence of a field of power at a meta-level across spatial, national, social, economic and cultural boundaries. Acts and behaviours within the global field of power have implications and effects beyond the particular geographic, social and professional fields occupied by the individuals; they ripple throughout the world as Vincent, a grassroots activist, describes, *"[WSF] was doing something from the micro to the macro and back again, it was feeding the ideas and spreading more like capillary structures into the society"*. Individuals struggle to dominate or subvert in order to 'make the world'.

In the global field of power, individuals exercise influence and control over policies and procedures that impact across geographic boundaries and may not be immediately visible or democratic. Forums offer places through which a global game of world making can be played with multiple positions for individuals to challenge one another. There is therefore hierarchy and dominance within the field, but this does not preclude the opportunity for subversion to occur, for example, through challenge and/or new entrants. Sam, an executive director, explains the interactions through WEF between himself and the civil society work of his organization with others from a range of political and intellectual fields.

*"we've been one of the world leaders in measuring wellbeing and alternative GDP so because of that I was on a panel with Joe Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs, and the president of Costa Rica...giving us profile as a serious organization but also in terms of our voice being heard, so I think at Davos last year I talked about radical new forms of business, I talked about measuring wellbeing not GDP and I talked about inequality and the failure of the social contract in most countries, and I spent an early morning with the labour union representatives talking about the future of unions...then I had a series of private meetings on something that I'm involved in which is all about a new social covenant and value shifts."*

However, interacting with participants in the global field of power who represent different interests can create a paradox, with those aiming to subvert the current world order being seen as collaborators or colluders instead. For some, subversion should only be enacted in and through global forums which exist in direct opposition to the current order. Joshua, an executive director, explains:

*"for the bigger NGOs...the idea of being within the tent trying to influence these things is very important for them. And particularly for us [as an organization], this is very, very problematic... I use it in the same sense as it is used in France in the Nazi era, when I say collaboration I mean as in 'collaboration', I don't mean it in a nice way"*.

For others, subversion in the global field of power can and should (also) be enacted in and through global forums such as WEF with those who are perceived to generate, perpetuate and protect the current order. Riley, a director, explains the benefits of interactions as follows:

*"[WEF's] a vehicle by which we are able to take a topic on sustainability that we believe will be incredibly important and get it to a broad group of people at the*



*highest level and get them to begin to engage in it and understand it. And it doesn't solve the problem, the problem is solved or the issues are addressed after that either collectively or independently...it just starts moving the thinking on in organizations."*

As such, Riley recognises that participation is one part of a broader agenda towards change. Sam also describes the nature of participation in the field as being beyond the activities of something like WEF, explaining that *"going to Davos is just one bit, one way of identifying some of those progressive leaders and then work with some of them outside it. But we don't think that just talking at Davos alone is going to deliver."* Therefore it is not just about the interactions through these forums, but about what happens outside of them; the individuals may still be operating in the field of power, just in a different position within the field based on their other organizational or individual roles and responsibilities. A benefit of theorising the relationship between individuals as being within the global field of power is that their positions do not have to be directly interlocking, it denies the unity which is implied by 'class' or a similar term. Whilst there is a shared reason for playing the game of the field, the game being to create a better world, it is not necessarily a unifying reason. Struggle is clear according to whom else is participating and the capital resources they have, the differing definitions of what success looks like and how to deliver it, and the interests therein represented. Participants will face dilemmas in the pursuit of such collaborative or cooperative strategies instead of oppositional challenge and the promotion of alternatives. As Frances describes: *"it's just a bloody long battle and the question is how much is industry influencing politics, how much is politics influencing history and where the [WSF] certainly has huge strength is the emphasis on transparency, I think that is something that is absolutely needed"*.

The idea of the global field of power therefore allows us to get away from unhelpful binaries of 'us' against 'them', particularly as we are all subsumed with the systems of our world.

### **How to participate in the global field of power – distribution of valued capitals**

In the global field of power, individuals hold capitals that are valued beyond national, social, economic and cultural boundaries; they have global value. That is not to say that this value is necessarily universal or essential, but that the value stretches beyond typically defined boundaries and again, these capitals have implications and effects beyond the particular fields occupied by the individuals. Juliet, a managing director, describes this in the context of WEF:

*"the melting pot of those stakeholders, government, non-profit, corporate and development...World Bank, UN, they all have people there as well, [it] means that it is the most perfect forum for thinking about some of these big questions, and rarely do you have a salon, or a round table, or a conference that's going to bring together not just the level of leader, which of course is what WEF is all about, but that diversity of sectors"*.

Individuals struggle to prioritise the forms of capital which have most value in social fields (Swartz, 1997) and my research has begun to explore what could be considered 'global capital'. An emerging definition of global capital is that it is a form of symbolic capital that gets its value from the interaction and nesting of a range of accumulated capitals of different forms. As Frances describes, there is a need for an intersection of capitals in order to make

change: *“there’s no way you can solve the problems of the world with just non-profits, you need to mobilise business to move in a different direction, the legal system can help us, but I think it’s the intersection of non-profit and for-profit that’s important.”*

Without interaction and struggle between individuals with different positions within the global field of power and their capitals, the world will stay the same. Economic capital remains important because, at a basic level, without monetary resources, individuals are unable to travel or pay the required membership in order to participate in the global forums. However, this is insufficient on its own and the three main component capitals are summarised as follows.

Conversations, networks, introductions that happen whilst struggling in the field are incredibly important in the global field of power and these link to Bourdieu’s notion of **social capital**. So participants meet others, exchange knowledge capital as well as building social capital because of who they meet and then ‘know’. Victoria, a chief executive, illustrates this in her comment that *“the room fills up with energy, of power and the capacity that these people can actually, if they want to, really change the world.”* There is legitimacy gained through participation in these global forums, being seen to be legitimate in the global field and participants trust one another (or not, depending on the position in the struggle) to increase solidarity.

There is an extent to which **embodied capital** is therefore vital. There is high value in being in these discussions in person (as exemplified through the activities facilitated by WEF and WSF). Tristan, a religious leader, describes *“when you have an eyeball to eyeball challenge, it’s another human facing another human in the face and then you can actually talk about these things”*. Those within the global field of power have a voice through their participation, which offers potential for influence. Katherine, an associate vice president, describes this in the following example:

*“[at the first meeting] an industry person was really sort of hammering... ‘no, you’re wrong, you don’t need this’ to the point where last year that person seemed like they were coming around...to this year the person saying ‘it’s really, it’s been really good to have you involved over these few years because you’ve really helped us understand something that we wouldn’t have understood”*”.

Participants in the global field of power have to have time as a form of embodied capital to be able to act in this field in addition to their ‘day job’ responsibilities. Vincent expresses the direct relationship between time spent and the influence on discussions as follows:

*“they have time to go in every single meeting and write their documents, write their reports with a more strong presence...[for example] if you go to the Occupy movement, if you have time to camp in front of St Paul’s every single day, in the debate you’re going to promote your ideas, your beliefs, but if you go there once a week you’ve lost”*.

Bourdieu’s notion of **cultural capital** is represented as knowledge and expertise. Those who participate in the global field of power have knowledge that is valuable across fields and geographies. This may include health, communications and political relationships. WSF particularly, in Helen’s view, reveals the presence of *“multiple epistemologies, multiple forms of knowledge, multiple forms of political practice and at least in principle them all*

*being equally valid*". George, a senior academic, also explains that participants in WEF learn a lot from each other *"and that is probably the reason why people participate, it enables them to keep abreast of what is going on"*.

I argue that, particularly since the global financial crisis, more attention is being given to social and cultural forms of capital with value at a global level (genuinely or tokenistically, but that is for another debate). My research seeks to contribute by incorporating those individuals who marshal these forms of capital in a relation of struggle with others in dominant positions at a global level. There is competition for individuals to keep or improve their position through gains in capital. In the global field of power, global capital is privileged and this accumulated through a combination of social, cultural and embodied capitals, the value of which stretches beyond geographic and field boundaries. It is perhaps possible to see the marshalling of global capital in the practice of negotiation between corporations, states and civil society over the control/use of environmental/social resources and knowledge capital in international contexts. The mechanisms by which global capital is acquired, used, manipulated and maintained within the global field is shifting and providing openings for representatives of civil society in particular to gain ground.

### **The function of global power - effects on the socio-economic order**

There are practical differences between the ways in which participants in the global field of power consider responses towards global inequalities. WEF participants as incumbent and dominant are challenged for defending existing interests for short term action, operating in annual cycles (the meeting in Davos setting the agenda for the year, its Global Agenda Councils tasking one or two year task and finish activities). However, Riley explains change as follows: *"it's gone from 'we're not sure what sustainability means' to 'it's an important part of the consumer goods industry' to 'we can do some trials and identify work on sustainability' to recognising that to get it to scale we have to tackle consumption not just production."*

WSF participants are subverting and offering alternatives struggle for systemic change over the long term, facilitating a set of proposals for deeper and long-term change. Mason, a union representative, describes change as follows:

*"[WSF] exists as a space to facilitate different discussions. In the right time and place this can be pivotal. Tunisia recently passed a constitution which contains major advance in gender equity and democracy. This is at least partially a result of the WSF in Tunis last year, which facilitated discussions on the nature of the constitution, the role of the labour movement in shaping it, gender equity issues, economic justice issues and many, many other topics."*

So what is the usefulness of this analysis? I do maintain a healthy level of cynicism about the actual and potential improvement in the state of the world that is being struggled over through the global field of power as I have described it here. As Paul, a senior academic, commented about his participation, *"my immediate reaction was 'my God, if this is supposed to be the elite of the world, God help us!'"*. It is absolutely possible and appropriate to level criticism at some of the participants in forums such as WEF for being defenders and perpetuators of the dominant socio-economic systems and structures in our world. Just as it has also been suggested that *"WSF draws an elite of the counter hegemonic globalization"* (Vinhagen, 2008, pp. 142, emphasis original). Lucy's experience,



as a grassroots activist, echoes Paul's, *"there were two conflicting groups...and so one went on the stage and said something, then the other one went on afterwards, and I was just thinking 'yeah, we're going to change the world like this!'"* Despite these problems, disruption to the current socio-economic order can be provoked through varying interactions, collective action, advocacy and networks which are dispersed and flexible to respond to the issues under debate throughout the global field of power.

Global capital is a complex interaction of various capitals that individuals can marshal. Within individuals' fields of industry or expertise, they may move positions according to gains or losses in the capital that is privileged therein, for example, particular skills or knowledge, and may also move between related fields as part of an extension of their networks for the development of social capital. Chris, a senior academic, describes achievement by *"osmosis"* that *"we meet each other, we influence each other...you start to talk about your experiences, they share, people take them back"*. Therefore, for every one research conversation that has made me angry and frustrated, there have been two that have restored my faith and optimism in the actual and potential shifts towards the emergence of new worlds. Maybe faith and optimism (with a touch of realism) are forms of capital that are also necessary for participation in the global field of power?

Despite the paradoxes of collaboration, collusion and/or subversion in their struggles, momentum can be built towards systemic change in terms of the entrance to/exit of the global field of power of individuals representing different interests and marshalling different volumes and forms of capital. Participants are acting within boundaried or, as some would argue, compromised change characterised by co-optation and greenwashing. However, by recognising the relationship between the position of different actors and the way in which global capital is distributed, it is possible to at least promote space for change and conditions of possibility through conversation and interaction. There are frustrations as things move slowly. However, as Katherine describes, *"power is really leveraging the people in industry...to do things, to move things, and if they feel like they're being beaten up on, it's going to make it worse"*.

As Tyler, a chair of a foundation, states, *"the experience has been that participants are really walking the talk about improving the state of the world."* I would hope to highlight that, despite contradictions and dilemmas, those who are engaged in the struggle to subvert existing dominance are slowly and surely having some effect. These deliberate crossovers may provoke, shift the field through subversion through discordant experiences between individuals who see the world from different perspectives. As Sam comments, *"the most successful change comes where there is a very clear goal and then there's other mechanisms of creating new power bases, creating a new narrative, discrediting the old"*. Those who remain focused on that goal can chip away with influence. These can be uncomfortable experiences, with excitement from participation and exchange but losses in terms of revelations, sharing, shifting positions and clashes which may encourage a shift in disposition.

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed and anglicised to protect the anonymity of research participants.

## Bio

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Victoria graduated from Durham University with a first degree in Anthropology, then completed a Masters degree in Management whilst working in research and consultancy for a range of public sector organizations. During this time she worked on over 100 projects for a range of non-departmental public bodies and many local authorities. In 2011 she joined Newcastle University Business School as a research assistant on an ESRC funded project exploring storytelling in management practice. Following this, she became a Research Assistant on a project exploring the history and practice of entrepreneurial philanthropy. Since 2012 she has been completing her PhD, funded by Santander Universities, exploring 'how other worlds emerge' through the examples of the World Economic Forum and the World Social Forum. The PhD explores debates and discussions of sustainability as they happen at a global level through the sites, which have a historical oppositional relationship.

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